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Editorial

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have a hidden cost, being borne by our returning warriors in unrelenting anguish and 18 suicides a day.

Pfc. Joseph Dwyer didn't commit suicide - technically. But death was grim for this soldier, who was made famous by a 2003 photograph that shows him carrying an injured Iraqi boy.

Dwyer struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder, whose symptoms are seen in 1 in 5 soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Plagued by drug abuse, unemployment and marital strife, Dwyer died June 28, at age 31, in North Carolina after taking prescription pills and inhaling fumes from an aerosol cleaner.

Although he had returned from Iraq, he wasn't the same man. "Joseph never came home," said his mother, Maureen Dwyer, who believes the Army could have done more to help him.

This week, the Department of Veterans' Affairs reported that a suicide hot line for veterans has fielded 55,000 calls in its first year - 22,000 from veterans and the rest from people concerned about veterans.

Through the hot line, 1,221 would-be suicides were prevented, the report says. Many of the counselors are veterans.

"They have indicated to us that they are in extreme danger. Either they have guns in their hand or they're standing on a bridge or they've already swallowed pills," said Janet Kemp, the VA's suicide prevention coordinator.

U.S. Rep. Harry E. Mitchell, D-Ariz., is calling for expansion nationwide of the VA's hot line publicity campaign in Washington, D.C.

Ads there say: "It takes the courage and strength of a warrior to ask for help."

But a warrior can't ask for help if he doesn't know where to turn. The VA should comply with Mitchell's request at once.

While the hot line and its publicity are good steps in the right direction, they are long overdue - and they are not enough. The VA must seriously tackle this problem, not hide it.

The department was blasted in May for obfuscating suicide statistics, as evident in the opening line of a top official's e-mail on the data - "Shh!" - and the response to an information request from Mitchell, who was told to file a Freedom of Information Act request.

Such handling of data on our veterans' mental health is reprehensible. The VA has a responsibility to inform and raise awareness among citizens and members of Congress alike.

Accurate, timely information is essential for the veterans, their families and for members of Congress, who can enact legislation and appropriations to address these issues. No one deserves help more than our veterans - and they deserve the most and best help there is.